1: Bowen-Jones et al. K-5 (1955-1958) 1961
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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary agriculture can only be understood in terms of the whole nexus of environmental and human factors. Although a general truism this assertion continually needs to be emphasised in a study of Malta. In these islands the observer will meet more puzzling features both major and minor in scale than it is conceivable would be found in any territory of similar size. The wider one's comparative experience, the more it appears necessary to discard general principles and to adopt a habit of querying the origin of every minor element in the landscape. The various problems are examined elsewhere but a brief statement of their type and range will serve to depict the complex nature of Maltese agriculture.

All visitors to Malta are invariably impressed by the vast extent of stone terrace walls which give to the ground-level observer an impression of rocky barrenness. The questions which arise, and which have not been satisfactorily answered, are manifold in their complexity. Do the terrace-walls merely serve to retain naturally-evolved soil and if so is the present density of enclosures strictly necessary? Are these walls, on the other hand, ramparts behind which man-made soil accumulations have been slowly built up to create artificial fields? If the latter, does normal pedological analysis provide a sufficient basis for soil husbandry? If the former, how far can enclosures be enlarged to permit a greater use of mechanised techniques?

The climate of Malta, as analysed in Chapter II, has some especial characteristics. How far do certain combinations of temperature, humidity and wind velocity in various topographic circumstances encourage the appearance and survival of the very many diseases and pests which afflict Maltese crops? To what extent may the climate-soil complex be held responsible for the virtual absence of the olive and the remarkable ignorance concerning viticulture which is only now being dispelled? Must the physical environment be regarded as the main reason for the fact that Maltese farmers have never produced important indigenous strains of crops or livestock but have relied entirely on breeds imported from their more productive neighbours?

Innumerable queries of this type result from even the most cursory visual survey, and any attempt to answer them brings in even more complex human questions. If the maintenance of man-made soil in artificial fields by arduous manual labour is essential for the ecological stability of many regions, how important is the conflict between the needs of production and the social desires of the cultivators? How far has poor husbandry been a product of rural isolation? How measurable is distance as it affects contact between producer and market, between village-dweller and *il-Belt*? None of these and other questions is uniquely applicable to Malta, but *in loto* they present such a formidable array as to make one feel that these small islands have concentrated within them certain microcosmic qualities.

In this Section are considered some of the observable facts that directly concern the use and potentialities of agricultural resources. The main features of the economy and society in general have been described in previous sections; the basic elements of the agricultural sector may be summarised as follows.

The total area of the Maltese Islands is some 280,512 *tmien* of which 152,343 *tmien* are cultivated (54 per cent of the total) (1). The relationship between Malta and Gozo in these respects is remarkably constant, both islands having a similar proportion of worked land, Malta possessing 79 per cent. of the total area and of the cultivated land. Of the 7,272 *tmien* of irrigated land, almost 89 per cent. is found in Malta where the only large irrigated zones also occur.

This cultivated land is worked in 13,315 registered farmholdings of which over 70 per cent. are in Malta. The rural community (i.e. persons living in dwellings registered as farms and including farmworkers' children and other members of the family otherwise employed) number 57,354 (72 per cent. in Malta), almost 18 per cent. of the total population. Of this rural community 34

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per cent. are children under 14 years of age. The number of whole-time farmers, 8,100, is now smaller than the group of part-time agriculturalists - 8,946, and in its age-composition differs significantly from the total population - 48 per cent. are aged 50 years or more (1948 - 33.8 per cent.) as compared with 31 per cent. for the Islands as a whole.

The relatively small and, until very recently, declining size of the full-time farming population, and its rapid ageing, suggest a decline in the importance and status of agriculture. The implications of these figures are discussed elsewhere but it is worth noting that the agricultural areas are still inhabited by over 126,000 persons most of whom draw some real income from the land in amounts which may often be small per capita but which observation suggests are large in total.

The total value of the recorded crop product is estimated at some £2.27 millions. From observation in Malta and experience elsewhere one can suggest that is under-estimated by a fraction of the order of 10 per cent. (See p. 10, - Essential Statistics - for further information.)

The combined value of crop and livestock products is estimated at almost £6,000,000. The income accruing to the cultivators is distributed in such a multiplicity of ways in such varying amounts that no useful estimate of average per capita income can be made. Of the disbursements of some £3 millions, an amount of the order of £2¼ millions is expended on imports, notably of fodder and store cattle. Earnings of foreign currency amount to approximately £500,000, almost half of which derived from potato exports. This imbalance between imports and exports in the agricultural sector appears even more striking when one remembers that F.D.T. imports of over £9,000,000 make up 35 per cent. of the total Maltese import bill.

The efforts of the 9 per cent. of the employed population engaged in agriculture are already considerable but the needs of Malta are great. With no known physical resources of any size other than the land, it becomes of vital importance that farming productivity should be raised even further and that special effort is directed towards a legitimate degree of self-sufficiency in agricultural products. Much of the analysis that follows this introduction must be considered in the light of present and future needs.

REFERENCES

1. *et passim* Census of Agriculture, 1948. Malta. 1950.